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ABSTRACT

This report on competency testing utilizes a literature review, examines the state of the art to define competencies, and presents information from the field to delineate programmatic and administrative questions and their implications. Information was collected from school districts implementing minimum competency testing (MCT) programs through an open-ended interview-type instrument. Practical aspects of implementation reported are an important contribution of the report. It is revealed that it is still too early to determine the effectiveness of MCT programs, as longitudinal evaluations have not yet been computed. Public acceptance of MCT has been found to be positive. The summary of interviews is particularly helpful in the areas of purposes, selection of standards and delineation of competencies. Pragmatic aspects are emphasized. (Author/GK)

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# phi delta kappa report

## Greater Cleveland Inter-University Chapter

# Current Practices In The Implementation Of Minimal Competency Testing Programs

TM 810 807

# CURRENT PRACTICES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING PROGRAMS

PREPARED BY

THE RESEARCH COMMITTEE

of the

GREATER CLEVELAND INTERUNIVERSITY CHAPTER

of

PHI DELTA KAPPA

April 1, 1981
Cleveland, Ohio

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# FOREWORD

In 1978, the Greater Cleveland Inter-University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa reported its initial study of one of the most vexing educational issues--competency testing. Now in a second report, Phi Delta Kappa continues its search for thoughtful perspectives and sagacious action rooted in the practitioner's experience. In its continued exploration, the report utilizes a literature review, examines the state of the art to define competencies and presents information from the field to delineate programmatic and administrative questions and their implications.

Whatever one's opinion about competency testing, the movement emerges not only as an element in the demand for school accountability but as a response to the current adult illiteracy problem in the United States. Kozol has articulately documented a causality between illiteracy, marginal survival and disenfranchisement.[1] Citing the Adult Performance Level Report, he concludes that over thirty-five percent of the entire American adult population is unequipped to carry out the basic tasks with which to manage or survive the demands of everyday living. Kozol is one of the growing band of critics who believe that "archaic and inferior public schools" are locking people into a bondage when their actions and inactions preserve inability to write or understand the printed word. Elements of this scathing criticism remain in the minds of legislators, parents and taxpayers who demand that competency testing or some such process be mandated to ensure that schools do their job.

The report drew upon information supplied by school districts implementing MCT programs to develop an open ended interview-type instrument. Twenty-seven districts in different stages of MCT implementation were selected for follow-up study. Sixteen of the districts did respond. Although, one would hope that a higher rate of return would have been achieved, the practical aspects of implementation reported by these districts is an important contribution of the report.

The report reveals that it still is too early to determine the effectiveness of MCT programs given the fact that longitudinal evaluations have not yet been completed. Public acceptance of MCT has been positive in the respondent districts. With the heightened visibility of deficiencies in student achievement, school offerings are being reappraised. Diagnostic and corrective instructional skills on the part of teachers and developmental skills to improve the curriculum on the part of administrators have become survival tools for educators.

School districts contemplating MCT will find the summary of interviews particularly helpful in areas of purposes, selection of standards and delineation of competencies. By emphasizing the pragmatic aspects, the report assists the educator with helpful specifics. The ever present constraints in MCT programs--funding and communication--remain caveats.

There are no easy answers to the question of whether school personnel need more tests and competency tests in particular or technical assistance in promoting effective learning. Although

the report does not attempt answers to these questions, it does present stimulating issues with which public educators must deal.

The report is a good example of cooperative efforts of Kappans in the Greater Cleveland Chapter who, with all the demands in their active careers, gave of themselves for many hours to complete this undertaking. This report reflects the best of the ideals of Phi Delta Kappa--research, leadership and service.

Margaret Fleming
Deputy Superintendent
Cleveland (Ohio) Public Schools
March, 1981

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[1]Jonathan Kozol, Prisoner's of Silence, Continuum Publishing Corporation, 815 Second Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017, (1980).

# CURRENT PRACTICES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING PROGRAMS

## I. INTRODUCTION: HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

In May of 1978 the Research Committee of the Greater Cleveland (Ohio) Inter-University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa published the results of its year-long study of the competency testing movement in Cuyahoga County, Ohio (1). At that time at least 38 states plus the District of Columbia were implementing minimal competency testing programs.

The issues of competency testing had, at that time, emerged from some years of MCT experience in a few districts nationwide and were fueled by continuing and distressing reports of declining Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. In an effort to reverse these declines a vocal public began to demand greater school accountability, especially in the basic skills of reading and mathematics.

These demands for educational accountability did not fall on deaf ears because state legislators began to successfully agitate for mandated MCT programs as a means of ensuring that high school graduates have a firm foundation of basic skills.

The 1978 Phi Delta Kappa report concluded that those school districts which "might institute MCT programs are aware of the need for extensive involvement by teachers, parents, and consultants in the development and maintenance of the testing program (p. 38)." Yet, of the nine report recommendations (see pages 39-40), none dealt with

the problem of what a district should do between the decision to explore MCT possibilities and the implementation of a program.

Several recent court cases have raised concern suggesting that MCT programs should be developed with greater deliberation. In fact, the Johnson case in Florida actually resulted in some states slowing their move toward MCT (2). When this case was finally decided in July, 1979 competency testing was strengthened, since in its decision the court "upheld the graduation requirements in general, but ruled that the Florida program was imposed too hastily (3)." Most authorities believe that competency testing is not another educational fad but is here to stay.

In recognition of the projected wide-spread development and use of MCT programs, the 1978-79 Phi Delta Kappa Cleveland Inter-University Chapter initiated a two-year program in 1978 to explore the important, largely unexplored, territory between MCT study and MCT implementation. The committee elected to use the same procedures as did the 1977-78 committee, that is, literature survey and questionnaire. In effect, the proposed work would update the 1978 publication and attempt to develop a list of those events and activities which present MCT users believe were most important to the perceived or demonstrated success of their MCT programs.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

The essential questions that need to be addressed by any group contemplating the development and implementation of an MCT program fall under at least three headings: (1) specific MCT-related questions; (2) specific programmatic questions; and (3) administrative questions. MCT-related questions are those associated with the tests themselves, while programmatic questions raise concerns about the use of the tests.

Finally, administrative questions concern the "nuts-and-bolts" issues of how the MCT-related and programmatic questions will be addressed. Although there is an enormous amount of overlap amongst these three groups of questions, each will be discussed separately. It is important, however, to keep in mind that the three groups form a system of concerns which must always function as a unit in order to address their component problems and issues most successfully.

### MCT-Related Questions

There are three key testing issues in all MCT programs: (1) defining competencies; (2) identifying suitable tests or testing procedures; and (3) setting standards to differentiate those certified as demonstrating competence from those not certified (4).

Defining Competencies--Obviously, the identification of the competencies to be measured depends on many issues which must be resolved early in the planning phase. Although one program might choose to focus on basic skills or school subjects, and another on life areas, it is possible that these may be measured in combination

(ex. basic skills applied in school subjects) or even separately for different groups of students (dependent on the specific instructional program in which a student is enrolled).

Shirley Boes Neill, in her summary of MCT issues (5) stresses the point that there must be a match between tests and instruction, and that this area is ripe for legal challenge. She suggests that school districts using MCT, especially as a graduation requirement, must be able to document in some objective way what is happening in the classroom.

Consequently, the competencies which are identified and selected for measurement must not be independent of the school curriculum, or if so, the district must commit itself to developing and implementing appropriate instructional programs.

The selection of competencies cannot be taken lightly. Strong definitions of purpose should first be developed as a framework within which the decision-making process can occur. It has, in fact, been suggested that, "The process whereby the lists of competencies are to be compiled is, unfortunately, equally vulnerable to question (6)." Certainly, one of the best ways to anticipate potential problems and, perhaps, serious legal challenges to MCT programs, is to carefully study the problems which others have encountered in their MCT programs. Some of these major problem areas emerged at a series of MCT conferences sponsored by the Education Commission of the States in the Fall of 1977. The following test construction concerns were identified in the conference report (7):

1. Selection of Items

   -may be difficult
   -should relate to objectives

2. Curricular Validity

   -knowledge and skills being tested must be in the curriculum

3. Amount of Testing

   -criterion-referenced tests are generally longer than norm-referenced tests
   -a great deal of other testing is already included in most district programs

4. Changes in Curriculum Content

   -updating of curriculum in response to new knowledge, modern technology, and so on, makes it difficult to construct long-lived tests or to anticipate future needs

5. Test Security

   -using the same test more than once creates test-retest problems, group-group comparisons, and so on
   -creation of alternate forms, item banks, and other approaches are costly
   -parents and teachers may have a right to see the tests for various purposes

6. Make the Test? Or Buy the Test?

   -local construction may lead to greater ownership and more successful test outcomes
   -published tests may be more soundly constructed but not necessarily transferable to the local situation
   -local construction will be more costly because of personnel and time needs

7. Evaluating Affective and Psychomotor Development

   -it may not be possible, or even desirable, to apply minimum standards to attitudinal areas

Tests and Testing Procedures--Another area which must be explored concerns the kinds of tests which should be developed and administered. Brickell (8) identifies four choices:

1. Actual Performance situations in later school or on the job. Brickell calls this the ideal testing.

-Expensive
-Time consuming (years)
-Results too late to help

2. Simulated performance situations in the school. Brickell calls this good testing.

-Cheaper, takes less time, quick results
-Situations are not real and results may not match actual performance
-There are few good tests available
-Takes more time and money then paper and pencil tests

3. School products and performances are things students make or do while studying in school.

-Not as good as simulated performance testing (student usually has help, test pressures are missing, it is hard to score results
-Takes less time and money than arranging special simulations

4. Paper-and-pencil tests in the classroom.

-Measure a narrow bank of knowledge or skill
-Far removed from actual performance situations
-Results may not predict actual successes in later school and life
-Quick, easy, cheap, and available

Brickell concludes, "As you move away from actual performance situations in life and move toward paper and pencil, testing becomes easier and cheaper, but the test results become less likely to predict later success (9)." Deciding which type of test to develop, then, is a difficult problem which must be resolved early in the planning process since different types of tests will most likely yield different results.

The 1978 Phi Delta Kappa report (10) made the following recommendations related to test construction:

1. Any school district which chooses to implement a program of Minimal Competency Testing should have available for public scrutiny a position paper which discusses:

The process used to develop the test or tests used to measure minimum competencies within the school district.

2. Any minimal competency tests should be developed by educators in a school district or group of contiguous districts. As a result, the probability of a match between pupil characteristics, instructional outcomes and test items will be increased.

3. Such tests be generated from a publically available analysis of the domain or content area which the test samples. This analysis should be developed by the school districts that use the test.

   Examples of appropriate analyses are task descriptions, learning hierarchies and various kinds of flow charts.

4. The analysis of the domain or content area is reflected in the design of instructional lessons and units to insure a match between what is taught and what is tested. This match should be at the appropriate level of learning, for the most part conceptual as opposed to mechanical.

5. Implementers of MCT Programs must provide interested persons with a written explanation of the process used to:

   a. Demonstrate an acceptable level of test reliability.

   b. Demonstrate an acceptable level of test validity.

   This explanation should extend beyond an uncritical acceptance of publisher's information.

6. Implementers should provide interested persons with a written explanation of the performance standards upon which tests are based. The explanation should include an evaluation of other standards which might have been used.

   For example, is the standard a mastery or proficiency level? Is it an arbitrary cutoff score?

The test construction concerns, the four kinds of tests, and the six PDK recommendations serve to reinforce the need for exceptional MCT preplanning. McClung (11) suggests that an appropriate model program should "provide for representative community-based

participation." This participation may include identification and clarification of goals and objectives, identification of competencies and groups to be tested, determining how and when to test, and helping to set standards. For districts electing to construct their own tests, or even choosing to modify existing tests, consultant experts may be required to assist with most of these activities.

Setting Standards--The Ohio Forum on Educational Competence suggested (12) that minimum competency levels should be set by representative groups of teachers, administrators, board members and citizens. This practice would seem appropriate if legal problems are to be reduced but, also, because of the necessary sharing of responsibility for learning by the school, the student, the home, and the community.

It is important, too, for competency test, as much as for entire MCT programs, to reflect the ideas of everyone who is involved, either directly or indirectly.

According to Miller (13), "the question remains, will mandatory standards insure instruction in the basic skills and improve the learning/teaching process?" She suggests that the answer to this question is political as well as technical because problems arise concerning the control of schools and instruction. As one legislator said, "We live in a test-conscious society where people look at the test results and, unfortunately, too often lose sight of the processes that procede it (14)." It seems clear, then, that test development activities should have a sound foundation of goals and objectives, and should be based on a direct relationship with the intended curriculum and instructional process.

As examples of the foregoing, we may cite Florida, where the 1978

tests were routinely revised by (the) student assessment staff after considerable review by teachers, administrators, and curriculum leaders throughout the state. Field-testing of the proposed test was also encouraged. Pennsylvania's Project 81, for example, is a competency-based program which was begun in 1976 and is scheduled for completion in 1981: "Through Project 81, 12 districts serve as models for developing a competency-based program directed toward the goal of a high school diploma that guarantees certain knowledge and abilities (15)." As a further example, the Gary (Indiana) Board of School Trustees, in 1974, mandated a minimum achievement standard for all students prior to receiving a diploma. This was done only after two years of extensive activities by various committees (16)."

It is clear that test construction and implementation in MCT programs is a complex process. This process includes identification of competencies, construction or selection of tests, and determination of standards. These activities raise additional questions of legalities, practicalities, and economics, and these must all be given careful consideration throughout the MCT-development process.

Programmatic Questions

The kinds of tests which are developed or selected will, to a very great extent, be determined by the goals and objectives of the competency program itself. Likewise, the use of the test results may also be greatly determined by the program.

Some tests may be used to help identify the competencies which the schools will be responsible for teaching. All students may be

required to master these skills. Grade promotion or graduation may be determined by the student's scores on the tests.

Requirements may only be reflected in mandatory assignment to remedial classes for students who cannot meet the established minimum standards. Tutorial services, special classes, alternative tracking, and extensive parent-teacher-administrator-student conferences are all variations of this theme. At the extreme are those programs which might encourage such students to drop out of school, or, perhaps, to offer a certificate of program completion rather than a standard diploma.

Regardless of the purpose for which a test is used, MCT programs face a potential multitude of problems. McClung (17), for example, identifies six major sources of legal difficulties.

1. Racial Discrimination

   -Is the test culture free?
   -Is there a possibility of "prior effects?"
   -Does the test reflect the pluralistic society experienced by the student population?

2. Inadequate Phase-In

   -Is the use of the test commensurate with the pretest notice given to students?
   -Was the pretest experience of the students sufficient for the test?

3. Reliability and Validity Problems

   -Was the test evaluated before being used as intended?

4. Matching the Test with the Instruction

   -Did the test measure what was taught?

5. Inadequate Remedial Instruction

   -Does the program provide for multiple evaluation, learning, and remedial opportunities?

6. Apportionment of Responsibility

-Do students and educators share responsibility for learning in an equal way?

McClung (18) suggests a two-phased program to help alleviate some of the concerns which are addressed above. Phase I would be a testing program based on the curriculum and instruction to which students had already been exposed. Phase II would then be based on a new curriculum and instructional approach which would be based on the goals and objectives of the selected MCT program and on the agreed-upon use of the test results. He further cautions that "districts charged with past discrimination may find that even 12 years may be considered inadequate notice to deny a high school diploma based on the results of a minimum competency test." He feels that, "It is likely that many if not most of those students failing the test would have studied differently in earlier years had they been given (prior) notice - and teachers might have taught differently as well."

All states may soon, some say 1984, require high school graduates to demonstrate attainment of certain minimal competencies. Although the Federal Department of Education may consider developing a policy statement on MCT sometime in the future, it seems likely that there will be many court cases regarding MCT programs before such a statement is available. Many of these cases will focus on issues similar to those discussed in this paper unless program developers exercise great care in their planning.

Administrative Questions

Planning and implementation efforts require a vast amount of attention to many major details. Miller (19) identified the following potential pitfalls which could limit the effectiveness of MCT programs.

1. Losing sight of the students' needs.
2. Allowing the test to determine the curriculum and instruction.
3. Assuming that a state's legislation or testing program will transfer appropriately to a new situation.
4. Trying an untested program of minimum competency testing to high school graduation or teacher evaluation.
5. Implementing a program without a broad base of support at grass roots level.
6. Not allowing enough time for selecting competencies, determining standards, piloting tests or planning curriculum revisions.
7. Asking for a "Cadillac Model," but allowing only a "Model T" budget.
8. Ignoring the special subpopulation needs (bilingual, handicapped, learning disabled).

In effect, the complex issues within MCT become clear, but not necessarily solved, very early in the planning phase. This can be a primary source of problem to MCT programs because, ..."too often, enthusiasts of minimal competency testing seem inclined to rush into implementation without considering the ambiguities involving the ideas on which such testing programs are based (20)." Since these programs are not only expensive to implement properly and are, in addition, very often open to legal attack, it is an imperative that great care and consideration be given to them during the entire planning period.

Implications

School districts that consider development and implementation of an MCT program must resolve, first, to assign the appropriate personnel and time to the task. The personnel should include not only district educators but, also, community persons and out-of-district educators. Consultants will be required for many purposes and should be identified and utilized early in the program planning. As minimum competency programs are planned, consideration must be given to all information gathered from citizens, students, and educators.

Secondly, legal issues should be carefully reviewed. Court attacks on the requirement to pass tests as a prerequisite to receiving a diploma have become more common. Other issues may require resolution through court action. These include testing for handicapped students, teacher accountability, racial and cultural discrimination, content validity of tests, and length of phase-in period. Although most MCT programs are state mandated, it appears that most legal challenges will be made at the local district level. Layers will become much more visible on the educational scene.

Finally the economic impact of an adequately developed and implemented MCT program must be prudently considered. Airasian et al (21) warns that, "Policy makers should be aware that the general magnitude of costs is largely determined by the a priori decisions they make about the purposes and design of their program." Further, "the cost issue itself may be of overriding importance in determining the nature and viability of minimal competency testing programs."

The cost issue was emphasized by Miller in her list of potential pit falls which was referred to earlier. Miller warned of asking for

a "Cadillac Model," but allowing only a "Model T" budget. Walter B. Waetjen, the president of Cleveland State University, posed a similar warning in similarly colorful language (22):

> "People's attitude toward education has been reverse of their attitude toward war. We proclaim that education is the ultimate of all human tasks, that its impact on the happiness and prosperity of a society are monumental and that its values transcend all others."
>
> "Then we proceed cautiously to confine education to a little book learning and dole it out in bargain lots to groups privileged in certain economic and social ways."
>
> "We serve education timidly. We do not shoot the works as we do in war. We shoot four bits and then gripe that our winnings are small."

Summary

MCT program developers face a multitude of problems. The way in which these problems are addressed will have an important bearing on the success of the program. It is critical that development activities take into account not only the experiences of other MCT developers but, also, of the special needs of their own community. The consequences of poor planning, planning in isolation, and of a low budget will be, at best, a minimally effective program and, at worst, serious court tests of the implemented program.

Minimal Competency Testing has great potential for influencing our educational system in a positive way. In a sense, the issues which must be addressed are really a means of nurturing what is still an embryonic approach to evaluating educational outcomes. Carelessly nurtured, the embryo will probably wither and disappear; carefully nurtured, the embryo will mature to serve well the purposes for which it is intended.

## III. PURPOSE AND PROCEDURES

### Purpose

The Greater Cleveland Inter-University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa proposed, in Fall of 1978, to conduct such activities as were required to define the present state of MCT implementation in the United States. The activities were designed to (1) to collect information regarding MCT implementation in various school districts; (2) organize the information regarding MCT implementation; (3) utilize MCT consultants to provide additional input; and (4) prepare and disseminate an implementation manual which could be used by school districts which have decided to develop and implement an MCT program.

### Procedures

The Chapter decided to survey local school district programs rather than regional or state efforts because, (1) sufficient emphasis and investigation have been directed towards state programs and, (2) our interests rest almost exclusively with locally developed programs. In September, 1979 ninety checklist/questionnaires were sent to school districts across the country.

The questionnaire returns were summarized (see Section IV) and an open-ended interview-type questionnaire was constructed based on the results. The results also provided information which was used to select those districts which would be asked to provide additional information using the second questionnaire.

Twenty-seven districts, representing a range of district sizes and in different stages of MCT implementation, were selected for

follow-up study.

Follow-up information was summarized (see Section V) and used in conjunction with the preliminary questionnaire results to derive the recommendations which are discussed in Section V. For purposes of preparing these recommendations the questionaire items were grouped into three categories:

Category A: Motivation and Purposes

Category B: Selection of Competencies, Tests, Standards and Procedures

Category C: Impact, Follow-up and Change

Rationale

In-depth studies of MCT programs usually focus on one school district at a time. Such studies generally look at tests, standards, and results, but rarely at the efforts which went into program development and implementation. Consequently, there appears to be a need for information about the appropriate steps which should be taken during the critical pre-implementation stages of MCT program development. Such information should be immensely helpful to districts which are contemplating MCT by helping them avoid some of the major problems and issues which other districts have faced, and by identifying some important program components which can help make an MCT program successful.

## IV. RESULTS

Summary of MCT Questionnaire #1

Approximately 90 questionnaires were sent to school districts across the United States. Returns were received from 61 districts for a return of about 68 percent. Of the respondents 56 (62%) identified themselves with MCT to some degree. 94% indicated that they would support the data collection process. Enrollments of responding districts ranged from 715 to 500,000 for a total enrollment of almost 2 million students. Although most responses were from Ohio schools, questionnaires were returned from districts in Utah, North Carolina, Illinois, Indiana, Colorado, Texas, West Virginia, Nebraska, Michigan, and Oregon.

Motivation and Procedures. Respondents were almost equally divided between those who had developed and implemented MCT programs and those who were still in study, planning, and development stages. Responses to Item Number 1: Position of reporting districts with regard to MCT, are summarized as follows:

45.8% A. Program developed and implemented.
16.9% B. Program developed but not fully implemented.
15.3% C. Program planned and in development stage.
8.5% D. Committee involved in study of issues.
3.4% E. Recently decided to study MCT.
10.2% F. Other: Pilot; Curriculum Evaluation; Within next two years; no action this year; English Comp only; tests selected, planning continues

Over half of the respondents indicated that they were testing or planning to test basic skills. Others were almost equally divided between Life/Survival Skills and School Subjects. One school system indicated that they were testing or planning to test

study skills. Responses to Item Number 2: Area(s) being tested or planning to test, are summarized as follows:

18.4% Life/Survival Skills.
61.8% Basic Skills: Reading; Writing; Math; Language Arts; Science; Social Studies; Computation; Listening/Speaking; Functional Competencies; Grammar; Vocabulary; Vocational Orientation.
18.4% School Subjects; English; Math; Reading; Career Ed; Government; Writing; Science.
1.3% Other; Study Skills.

In response to Item Number 3: Grades testing or to be tested, respondents indicated they they were testing across grade levels, K-12, with the majority testing in Grades 3, 8, 9, 10, 11.

Standards, Selection and Procedures. In response to Item Number 4: Promotion and/or graduation dependent upon MCT results, the majority of respondents indicated that MCT results will not be used for promotion (65.3%) or graduation (50%). The remainder indicated that they were undecided regarding promotion (12.2%) and graduation (11.1%).

Approximately half of the respondents indicated that they were using locally developed tests. Of those using standardized tests one-third had selected the California Achievement Test (CAT). Responses to Item Number 5: Testing instruments, are summarized as follows:

52.1% Locally Developed
23.3% Standardized: CAT; ITBS; ITED; SRA; STEP; MAT; SFTAA.
24.7% Commercially Developed

In response to Item Number 6: Remedial assistance program, over 90% indicated that they were planning remedial assistance programs.

Summary of MCT Interviews

16 of the 27 school districts selected for follow-up study responded to: (1) personal interviews, (2) telephone interviews, or (3) provided written responses to the interview questions. Following is a summary of the information obtained through the follow-up study.

Motivation and Purposes. Most districts agreed that the primary motivating force for beginning Minimum Competency Testing Programs was media reports regarding poor educational performance in reading and mathematics. Local examples of poor basic skill performance in the work place provided additional motivation.

The respondents were divided as to the origin of their local movement. These origins included: (1) state mandates and local initiatives, (2) administrator and teacher concerns, (3) administrative responsibility, and (4) school board initiatives.

The consensus of respondents was the the purposes or goals of a Minimum Competency Testing Program (MCT) should be comprehensive in nature. MCT was perceived as being an effective method to acknowledge and deal with individual needs. It was further recognized that particular attention should be directed to the question of diagnostic tests and remediation for the improvement of basic skills.

The basic purposes most often listed included (1) measurement of student performance, (2) basic skills, and (3) improvement of the instructional program and general curriculum design. Also identified were, (4) life skills, (5) remedial help, (6) set graduation standards, and (7) to meet state requirements.

Most respondents focused on assessment of student academic needs as the primary purpose of Minimum Competency Testing. Curricular and instructional implications were noted, but some made clear the point that school or teacher performance was not an issue. Concerning this latter point, it was suggested by the respondents that such evaluations would weaken program impact.

Standards, Selection and Procedures. Decisions regarding the establishment of standards have generally been the result of group efforts. These groups are most often comprised of school and community representatives or of school personnel and an external advisor. Pilot testing was reported as a common means for determining if preliminary standards were realistic.

Special student groups were also taken into consideration when standards were established. Special education students were mentioned as the example of groups with special needs which must be addressed.

As with standards, selection of competencies was also reported as requiring group effort. Local needs assessments, experts, and analysis of subject matter were reported as sources for competencies to be considered. Also reported were state mandates which defined desirable minimum competency levels which should be the target of MCT programs.

Most districts indicated that they utilized district-developed tests and procedures, but only one respondent specifically indicated that their tests and procedures were developed directly from their goal statements. Other sources reported were state-developed tests, or standardized tests. In several of the reporting districts local

goals and objectives were utilized by commercial test construction companies to develop tests specifically designed to meet local needs.

Impact, Follow-up and Change. Minimum Competency Testing, at this date, has been generally well received by the public. However, greater attention must be paid to improving communications with parents and with special interest groups in order to derive and define the many facets of Minimum Competency Testing in more specific and clearer terms. Ongoing efforts to continue and improve these efforts are necessary in order to realize established goals.

The respondents reported (1) existence of general community support, (2) generally favorable impact on community groups, (3) focus on standardization of courses and more appropriate use of tests, and (4) curriculum impact.

Although extensive, longitudinal evaluations have not been possible because Minimum Competency Testing Programs have been in operation for only a few years (or less!) the data support the contention that such programs can help increase test scores. The respondents reported that the number of students meeting set standards has also been increasing in many of the districts interviewed.

While follow-up studies were encouraging they indicated several concerns: (1) too little data have been collected about Minimum Competency Testing Programs; (2) adequate funding has been a serious problem; and (3) the short life of most Minimum Competency Testing Programs has made valid longitudinal studies incomplete at best, and, for the most part, not yet possible.

Change is an important consideration even in Minimum Competency Testing Programs which have already been implemented. Change for the sake of change has not been the direction. Instead, there is a normal evolution of Minimum Competency Programs based on observed results, newly identified community needs, and other input derived from educational, community, and public relations activities.

Specific areas cited by the respondents as areas requiring change include, (1) improvement of data collection techniques, (2) improvement of funding levels, and (3) improved communications with parents and special interest groups. These results strongly suggest that change should be a planned strategy for every Minimum Competency Testing Program.

## V. RECOMMENDATIONS: COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFUL MCT IMPLEMENTATION

The sixteen school districts which responded to in-depth interviews were asked to identify MCT program components which contributed to successful MCT implementation. Based on the assumption that interview respondents represent a cross-section of local district MCT implementation, interview data was analyzed and specific MCT program components were identified as contributing to successful MCT implementation. These components are organized under the general headings: (1) Motivation and Purposes, (2) Standards, Selection and Procedures, (3) Impact, Follow-up and Change. Where possible, specific examples from program implementors are included.

### Motivation and Purposes

Implemented programs are:

1. Responsive to local needs rather than state mandates.

   Examples:

   -General concern over poor student performance in English and math

   -The administration in the district had an interest in developing a goal based curriculum

   -Wanted to develop own program before legislature forced them to do so

   -New superintendent wanted to provide some replicability and standardization of the curriculum since students move throughout the district frequently

2. Preceded or accompanied by curriculum change.

   Examples:

   -Curriculum had been standardized and systematized before MCT came into vogue. School district was in the forefront of the accountability movement.

-Need for diagnosis of students' weaknesses and provide opportunity to take a course to improve performance

-Part of overall curriculum effort within district

3. At least, in part, based upon a spirit of diagnosis and remediation.

Examples:

-To identify students who do not meet the minimum competency standards and require remedial help

-Increased proficiency in English and math skills

-To ensure that our students do have minimum knowledge needed for graduation

-To legitimize academic performance for lower performing students

-To find out the needs of students and determine what skills are needed and program accordingly. Very individualized program

-To improve basic skills and find out about the needs of the students.

4. Supported by the Superintendent and through resolutions by the Board of Education.

Examples:

-School board members were concerned, read about programs elsewhere

-We were mandated by our Board of Trustees to implement an MCT program

-Superintendent anticipated pressure by responding to informal needs assessment

Additional Observations

Implemented programs:

1. do not evaluate schools and teachers and then use the data as a basis for personnel decisions.

2. are not limited only to graduation decision-making.

3. are evolutionary in spirit, beginning in the early elementary grades and continuing through high school.

4. possess a variety of goals and purposes.

Standards, Selection and Procedures

Implemented programs are:

1. Developed after consultation with the co-operation from teachers, parents, students, community members and consultants.

   Examples:

   -Combination of University collaboration and in-district decision-making

   -Advice from school advisory committee (parents and other citizens, including professional educators) and the instructional staff of the Department of Secondary Education

   -We went through two rounds of needs assessment using a random cross-section of the community. This resulted in 30 concept clusters and they were sent back for prioritizing to produce the top ten clusters. We went through the same process with elementary and secondary teachers. Agreement was outstanding among the three groups.

   -We used developmental teams in various areas. We tried to get parents but were unsuccessful. Teams consisted of teachers, administrators, students and state consultants.

   -Teacher teams with outside consultants developed the tests and set up the procedures.

2. Set performance standards and cut-off scores based upon local experiences--eg. pilot testing.

   Examples:

   -First time through a commercial test was selected. After experience, the district created its own.

   -We used the raw score equivalent of 8.6 grade level in reading and mathematics. Now we are developing a new standard that will be one grade level (9.6) higher because the students have scored so well.

   -Consultant and committee went to businesses to pilot test the standard graduates of our high schools. Out of this pilot test the determination was made that 60% was a reasonable cut-off score.

3. Employ a team approach to the writing of standards, competencies, tests and other procedures.

Examples:

-Teacher teams with outside consultants created the tests.

-As part of the curriculum development effort, an attempt was made to design an English curriculum around Bloom's Taxonomy. The tests and procedures were largely created by the local school staff.

-We wanted a test of about 90 items. We had the goals as established through needs assessment. We created a professional committee of teachers and asked them to identify objectives within each of the highly ranked goals--objectives that the schools could actually accomplish.

Additional Observations

Implemented programs:

Focused attention on school subjects or upon basic skills. Information on life skills is too scarce to be able to identify key elements.

Impact, Follow-Up and Change

Implemented programs:

1. Achieved community support.

Examples:

-Most community people are satisfied that we are using objective measures of performance in addition to school grades.

-The community was favor of the program. Gave schools more credibility.

-Positive impact, publicity turned around. Sure a minority of the community is opposed, but the majority is supportive.

-Positive support. Gained support for our levy campaign.

2. Established a spirit of district and school accountability.

Examples:

-Much clearer program delineation. Better understanding of program by teachers. Teachers pay more attention to goals and use test data to alter instruction.

-As noted, MCT program is part of an overall curriculum development process. Impossible to separate MCT from this new curriculum effort. Teachers, especially in English are being asked to adhere more closely to prescribed curriculum particularly in the areas of writing and language arts.

-The testing program and the curriculum and instruction are working together. Everyone has been made more accountable.

-Lower level courses are designed to teach skills that are basic and are measured on the standardized tests. We actually get closer standardization of course content from one instructor to the next.

3. Increased teacher and curriculum planners' skills in diagnosis and remediation.

Examples:

-In pilot test, 46% of the students failed the math section, 34% failed the language arts and 16% failed the reading section. We went back to administrators to discuss remediation needs. We believed that 8% to 15% would be an appropriate rate of failure. After most schools took on the challenge the failure rate dropped dramatically.

-A greater emphasis on the remedial program had already been established. The enrollment in remedial courses has jumped greatly after first year of MCT implementation.

4. Expanded MCT programs to other grade levels and expanded the scope of remediation and curriculum change.

Examples:

-All elementary schools have received the curriculum guide for the high school course. The interim superintendent is at the forefront of the movement to change the elementary school curriculum. Let's make sure that the basic skills are being taught.

-Third and seventh grade testing will increase the percentage of students who perform well on graduation competency tests.

-Include writing and possible citizenship in the competencies to be measured and required for graduation.

-Looking at ways to make instructional program better. Work more on instructional goals.

-We are instituting a seventh grade test for promotion to high school. We will withhold promotion for one year. We will be developing a third grade version, very diagnostic in form. We will be giving "completion of program" certificates to high school students who complete program but do not pass competency tests.

5. Recognized improvements in student basic skill performance.

Examples:

-Testing since 1974. Consistent gain in number of students meeting criteria. Substantial gains have been made in standardized test scores.

-Improvement over four years has been 1% per year.

-Test score improvement especially Iowa Tests.

-We established the requirement in 1975 to be effective with the graduating class of 1979. Annual test results of graduating classes of 1979 and 1978 indicated that if the criteria were applied a significant percentage of students could not have met them. In 1979, that percentage was reduced to about 3% of the total graduates. The trend for the class of 1979 became noticeable a year earlier when their test results were compared to the class of 1978 and their test results as juniors.

6. Recognized problems for future attention.

Examples:

-There will be in-service training in the basics for teachers, continued communication with the parents and continued state support in financing the remedial program.

-Test security is a problem and steps must be taken to protect security.

-We are creating an item bank to provide additional security for the test.

-Teachers have to learn to use a goal based instructional model. A great deal of in-service is needed.

-More money is needed.

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## APPENDIX A

## MCT QUESTIONNAIRE NUMBER ONE

A preliminary questionnaire was developed and used to determine those school districts which were actively involved in minimal competency testing at the time of the survey (October-November, 1979). The questionnaire was sent to approximately 90 school districts across the United States, including not only those which were already known to the Research Committee but, also, to many which were identified by state school superintendents at the request of the committee.

This dual process was used as a means of sorting out actual MCT-users from those which, for a variety of reasons, had been erroneously associated with MCT. The returns did, in fact, uncover many such school districts and the results, therefore, include only those districts which had made at least the minimum decision to explore MCT potentials.

Appendix A includes the following:

* Letter to state school superintendents;
* Cover letter to accompany the questionnaire;
* The questionnaire; and
* A summary of questionnaire responses.

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**GREATER CLEVELAND INTER-UNIVERSITY CHAPTER**

1. Letter to State Superintendents

Dear

The Research Committee of the Greater Cleveland Inter-University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa is in the process of developing a procedural guide for community implementation of a minimal competency testing (MCT) program. Your state has been identified as one which provides for local school district development of MCT programs. For this reason, we are requesting your assistance in identifying local school districts which are in the process of developing and implementing a MCT program.

Would you provide us with a list of school districts involved in the process of developing and implementing MCT programs. Enclosed is a copy of the cover letter and questionnaire which we will use for our survey.

Sincerely,

# PHI DELTA KAPPA

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**GREATER CLEVELAND INTER-UNIVERSITY CHAPTER**

2. Questionnaire Cover Letter

Dear

The Research Committee of the Greater Cleveland Inter-University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa is in the process of developing a procedural guide for community implementation of a minimal competency testing (MCT) program. Your district has been identified as one which has implemented or is in the process of implementing a MCT program. For this reason, we are requesting your assistance in completing the attached questionnaire. We realize that this questionnaire will take some time to complete, but feel your input is important to the development of our guide, and perhaps together we can make the implementation of MCT easier for other school districts in Ohio.

In responding to the questionnaire please keep in mind that we are primarily interested in processes and procedures. We want to be sure that school districts address themselves to the proper questions and arrive at the most appropriate answers for them. Thus, we are more interested in the process you followed in answering questions, than in the answers themselves. We do not expect all districts to arrive at the same conclusions; nor do we think they should.

You may still be in the development stage and thus have not answered all these questions yet yourself. If that is the case, just respond to those items on the questionnaire which are appropriate.

In our guide no mention will be made about specific school districts. All responses will be strictly confidential. As you are aware, time is running out for Ohio school districts to begin implementing MCT. Therefore, it is very important that we receive your completed questionnaire as soon as possible. Your time and thoughtful consideration are sincerely appreciated.

Very truly yours,

# PHI DELTA KAPPA

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**GREATER CLEVELAND INTER-UNIVERSITY CHAPTER**

3. MCT Questionnaire

School District _____ Date _____

Address _____

_____

Contact Person _____ Phone ( ) _____

Number of pupils enrolled in district? _____

Minimal Competency Testing (MCT) programs are in various stages of development throughout the country. Local school districts fall all along the continuum illustrated below.

A B C D E F

A. Program developed and implemented, i.e. tests have been selected, administered, and the results are being used in making decisions.

B. Program developed but not fully implemented.

C. Program planned and in development stage.

D. Committee involved in study of issues.

E. Recently (within last three months) decided to study MCT carefully, but no specific actions taken at this time.

F. Other. Please explain briefly: _____

_____

1. Please put an X on the above continuum to indicate where you feel your district is with regard to MCT at this time.

Considering your stage of development in an MCT program please respond to the following questions.

2. What area(s) are you now testing, or planning to test, in your MCT program?

____Life/Survival Skills

____Basic Skills: _____, _____, _____

____School Subjects: _____, _____, _____

____Other: _____

_____

3. Please list the specific grades that you are now testing, or planning to test, in your MCT program. _____

_____

4. Are, or will, promotion and/or graduation be dependent upon MCT results?

a. Promotion? yes ____ no ____

undecided ____

b. Graduation? yes ____ no ____

undecided ____

5. Are, or will, you be using locally developed instruments, instruments developed commercially for your district, and/or standardized instruments? If yes, please identify briefly.

Locally Developed _____

Standardized _____

Commercially Developed _____

6. Have you implemented, or planned for, a remedial assistance program? If yes, please identify and describe briefly.

no ____ yes ____ description _____

_____

_____

In the event we need additional information may we contact you or one of your representatives? If we may contact someone other than you, please provide their name and telephone number.

____Please continue to contact me regarding MCT in our district.

____Please contact the following regarding MCT in our district. (S)he has been informed of your interest.

(Name) _____

(Address) _____

_____

(Telephone) (  ) _____

Please use the preaddressed stamped envelope to return this questionnaire. If the envelope is missing please return the questionnaire to:

# PHI DELTA KAPPA

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**GREATER CLEVELAND INTER-UNIVERSITY CHAPTER**

4. Summary of Questionnaire Responses

I. Approximately 90 questionnaires were sent to school districts across the United States. Returns were received from 61 districts for a return of 67.8 per cent. Of these, 56 (62.2%) identified themselves with MCT to some degree. The results of the questionnaire responses are summarized below.

II. ITEM NUMBER 1. Position of reporting district with regard to MCT:

45.8% A. Program developed and implemented, i.e. tests have been selected, administered, and the results are being used in making decisions.

16.9% B. Program developed but not fully implemented.

15.3% C. Program planned and in development stage.

8.5% D. Committee involved in study of issues.

3.4% E. Recently (within last three months) decided to study MCT carefully, but no specific actions taken at this time.

10.2% F. Other. Please explain briefly:

pilot 1
curriculum evaluation 1
within next 2 years 1
no action this year 2
math only, just objectives 1
English Comp. only 1
tests selected, planning continues 1

**ITEM NUMBER 2.** What area(s) are you now testing, or planning to test in your MCT program?

18.4% Life/Survival Skills

60.5% Basic Skills: Reading-25; Writing-12; Math-30; Language Arts-14; Science-3; Social Studies-4; Computation-4; Listening/Speaking-1; Functional Competencies-2; Grammar-2; Vocabulary-2; Vocational Orientation-1.

15.8% School Subjects: English-4; Math-9; Reading-5; Career Ed-1; Government-1; Writing-1; Science-2.

5.3% Writing-1; Study Skills-1; Math-1; Language Arts-1.

**ITEM NUMBER 3.** List specific grades now testing, or planning to test in your MCT program.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| K - 1.7% | 7 - 5.9% | 10 - 11.8% |
| 1 - 4.6 | 8 - 10.9 | 11 - 12.2 |
| 2 - 3.8 | 9 - 10.1 | 12 - 7.6 |
| 3 - 10.9 | | |
| 4 - 5.9 | | |
| 5 - 7.6 | | |
| 6 - 6.8 | | |

**ITEM NUMBER 4.** Are or will promotion and/or graduation be dependent upon MCT results?

a. Promotion? yes 22.4% no 65.3%
undecided 12.2%

b. Graduation? yes 38.9% no 50.0%
undecided 11.1%

**ITEM NUMBER 5.** Are, or will, you be using locally developed instruments, instruments developed commercially for your district, and/or standardized instruments? If yes, please identify briefly.

51.1% Locally Developed

23.3% Standardized ----
- 4 CAT (33.3%)
- 3 ITBS (25.0%)
- 1 ea. (41.7%): ITED, SRA, STEP, MAT, SFTAA

24.7% Commercially Developed

ITEM NUMBER 6: Have you implemented, or planned for, a remedial assistance program? If yes, please identify and describe briefly.

9.6% NO

90.4% YES:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| remediation | 1 | summer school | 2 |
| tutorial | 7 | learning resource center | 2 |
| reading | 7 | special mathematics | 1 |
| math | 11 | half step promotion | 1 |
| State funds (Title I, DPPF, etc) | 4 | inclass remediation | 1 |
| transition | 1 | special classes | 2 |
| intervention | 1 | | |
| English | 4 | | |
| prescriptive | 1 | | |
| remedial courses | 16 | | |

FINALLY....

- 78.6% of the respondents asked to be placed on the continuing contacts list.
- 16.1% provided another contact person's name for further contact with the district.
- 94.6% of the MCT respondents asked for continuing contacts regarding MCT.
- Some of the MCT respondents did not provide information regarding the size of their district. For those that did, the total enrollment reported was 1,620,981 students (Range: 715 - Lockland City, Ohio; to 500,000 - Chicago, Ill.)
- Although most responses were from Ohio schools, questionnaires were returned from districts in Utah, North Carolina, Illinois, Indiana, Colorado, Texas, West Virginia, Nebraska, Michigan, Oregon.

## APPENDIX B

## MCT QUESTIONNAIRE NUMBER TWO

With the results of Questionnaire Number One in hand, the Research Committee was able to identify many districts for possible inclusion in the secondary phase of data collection. Twenty-seven districts were identified and a sample of sixteen was selected for actual interview. The final sample was balanced for district size, distribution throughout the United States, and position upon the MCT implementation continuum.

While it was necessary to interview some of these districts by telephone, most, including districts outside of Ohio were personally visited by a member of the Research Committee. Efforts were also made to collect printed materials used by these districts relative to MCT. All interviewees were telephoned prior to visiting, and a copy of the interview form was sent prior to the actual visit or telephone interview.

Appendix B consists of the following information, while the specific interview results are included in Chapter IV:

* Cover letter to interviewee: and
* The Interview Form.

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GREATER CLEVELAND INTER-UNIVERSITY CHAPTER

1. Letter to Interviewee

Dear

Following up on my phone conversation of March 19, I will arrange to be in on to conduct an interview with you concerning Minimal Competency Testing. I am enclosing a copy of your responses to our previous questionnaire and a copy of the interview form I will be using on You may wish to jot down some notes in preparation for my visit. Please accept our sincere thanks for participating in our chapter's research project.

Sincerely,

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**GREATER CLEVELAND INTER-UNIVERSITY CHAPTER**

2. Interview Form

Interviewer Notes:

This question is intended to surface the reasons why the MCT Program was created.

1. What motivated you to begin a Minimum Competency Testing Program?

---

Interviewer Notes:

If there is a document which lists the purposes, please secure a copy.

2. What are the purposes or goals of the MCT Program?

Interviewer Notes:

The purpose of this question is to distinguish between a motivation to evaluate the school program to improve it or to respond to community pressures for proof that students are competent when they graduate from high school.

3. Are the purposes of the MCT program primarily to

   a. evaluate the school or,

   b. evaluate the individual pupil?

---

Interviewer Notes:

Who was involved?
What competencies were selected?
If the competencies are in print, secure a copy.

4. How were the MCT competencies selected?

5. When a critic rises to question the accuracy and usefulness of the selected competencies, how do you respond?

---

Interviewer Notes:

What was the process, literature search, consultants, content working panel? If tests are available secure copies.

6. How were the tests and/or procedures which assess the competencies selected?

Interviewer Notes:

In this question, the performance standard or cut-off score should be defined. Find out if any students are exempted from the tests? Are any allowances made for "exceptional students" or "culturally different" students?

7. What determines whether students pass or fail?

---

8. What impact do you believe the MCT Program will have on the:

   1. Community?

   2. School Curriculum?

   3. What actually is taught in the classroom?

9. a. What evidence do you have that any of these hopes are being realized?

9. b. How are you collecting this evidence?

10. What additional steps must be taken to increase the chances that the MCT program will have the desired impact?

---

11. Are you planning any major changes in the Program?